

## Justification in Romans 3:21-24

*Ángel M. Rodríguez*

Rom 3.21-24: *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made know, to which the Law and the Prophets testified. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."*

1. Paul introduces a shift in the discussion that contrasts in a very marked way with what he was saying before. The contrast is between a time of sin and condemnation and a new reality, the "now" of salvation history inaugurated by Jesus. The previous time was described by Paul as a time when Jews and gentiles demonstrated to be in a state of sin, totally unable to live a righteous life. They were all condemned before the bar of God.

2. The "now" is the time when God did something wonderful for the human race. He revealed to us a new way of salvation that is absolutely independent from the law, and yet the law and the prophets testified about it; a righteousness of God carefully defined by Paul as the "righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ." He is carefully stating that there is no other form of righteousness that could solve the human predicament except the righteousness that is by faith in Jesus available to all/everyone who believes. Notice the use of "all" in the sense of "everyone."

3. The phrase "for/because there is no difference/distinction" is used to establish the fact that when it comes to salvation God saves all human beings, that is to say Jews and gentiles, in the same way, namely, through faith in Jesus ("all who believe").

4. But the fundamental reason why there is no "distinction" or favoritism on the part of

God is that—the *gar* ('for') is explicative—"all sinned and are falling short of the glory of Christ." The past tense, "all sinned," should not be interpreted in terms of sinning in Adam but in terms of the context in which the phrase is used. There is no reference in the context to Adam and there is no need to introduce him here. Secondly, nowhere in Romans does Paul use the phrase "in Adam," and we have no basis to introduce it in the epistle. When Paul says "all sinned" he is simply summarizing what he has been arguing in the previous chapters. In 1:18-32 he described the sinfulness of the gentiles and in 2:1-29 he described the condition of the Jews who, although having the law, did not keep it and the law itself condemned them as sinners. Paul is describing in those chapters the actual sinning of the human race not their sinning in Adam. This he clearly states in 3:9-10: "What then? Are we [the Jews] better than they [the gentiles]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one.'" The language is clearly universal including Jews and Greeks; "all" are under the power of sin and all sinned as he just demonstrated. Therefore, the phrase "all sinned" in 3:23 is a statement made by Paul based on his previous discussion of the actual condition of rebellion and sin of the human race and not on a primeval event that took place in Adam. The Greek past tense (known as a collective historical aorist) should be translated into English as a perfect, "have sinned."

5. Human sin has had and continues to have an impact on the spiritual life of all humans: they "fall short of the glory of God." The verb *hysterein* means "come short of, fail to attain a goal." The present tense indicates that this is the present and continuous condition of human beings. "'Glory' in the Bible characteristically refers to the magnificent presence of the Lord, and the eternal state was often pictured as a time when God's people would experience and have a part in that 'glory' (e.g., Isa. 35:2; Rom. 8:18; Phil. 3:21; 2 Thess. 2:14). And just as the sharing in God's 'glory' involves conformity to the 'image of Christ' (Rom. 8:29-30; Phil. 3:21), so the absence of glory involves a declension from the 'image of God' in which human beings were first made. . . . Paul, then, is indicating that all people fail to exhibit that 'being-

like-God' for which they were created. . ."<sup>[1]</sup> It is incorrect to argue that "all sinned (aorist) when Adam sinned and fall short (present) of the glory of God in their own personal conduct."<sup>[2]</sup> The past tense, the aorist, is omnitemporal and refers to the actual sinning of humans and "fall short of the glory of God" describes the defacing of the image of God in their lives. The connection of that state and condition of all humans with the sin of Adam is discussed by Paul in Rom 5:12-21.

6. Since all sinned they are all in need of divine grace. They are all, Jews and Gentiles, being justified by the righteousness of God revealed in Christ. The verb in 3:24 is a present participle masculine plural (*dikaioumenoi*), not a finite verb and its connection to verse 23 is not clear. Yet, the main thrust of the passage is clear: "All alike may receive this righteousness by faith and none has any claim to it on the ground of merit; for all alike—Jews as well as Gentiles—have sinned, and receive righteousness as a free gift altogether undeserved."<sup>[3]</sup> The best way to take the participle is in conjunction with the previous verse taking into consideration Paul's argument in the previous verses. Paul has made it clear that the righteousness of God is the same as righteousness by faith in Christ for all who believe. He has not argued for two different types of righteousness, one that is legal and universal and not by faith, and another that is personal and by faith. He defined righteousness of God as justification by faith. Therefore, there is no contextual and linguistic grounds to argue that in 3:24 Paul is introducing a new type of justification that is legal and universal independent of a faith-commitment to Jesus. That would be eisegesis. If in 3:24 Paul was describing what God did on the cross for the human race, one would have expected a finite verb in the past tense—"God declared righteous/justified all"—but that is not what we find. We find a present participle which indicates that the declaration of righteousness was not a universal declaration that took place at the cross. They "are being freely justified," means in the context that since there is no distinction because all sinned and are falling short of the glory of God, God is freely justifying by faith those who believe. There is only one way out of the human

predicament, namely, justification by faith to "all" who believe. The "all" who is justified freely in 3:24 is the same "all" who in 3:22 was defined as "all who believe." This justification is a free gift of the grace of God made possible through the redemption that was accomplished through Christ Jesus. Redemption—paying the price for our salvation--makes it possible for God to justify freely *only* those who believe in Christ.

- 
- [1]. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 226.  
[2]. Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 130.  
[3]. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 204.